

Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy

Lament for our Land: The Sorrow of Devaluing the Image of God

Genesis 1:24-31

Mark Vroegop

²⁴ And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds—livestock and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds." And it was so. ²⁵ And God made the beasts of the earth according to their kinds and the livestock according to their kinds, and everything that creeps on the ground according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. ²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." ²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. ²⁸ And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." ²⁹ And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. ³⁰ And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. ³¹ And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. *Genesis 1:24–31 (ESV)*

When you start to think and learn about lament, you begin to see and hear it in places that you might have missed before. There is an undercurrent of lament and sorrow in our world and in our lives. Someone even recently told me that they now even see the Christmas carol "Joy to the World" differently since we've been talking about lament. Here are the words from the third verse that we have sung many times during the Christmas season but probably didn't really think about what we were singing:

*No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found,
Far as the curse is found,
Far as, far as, the curse is found.*

We live in a world where sins and sorrows grow and where thorns infest the ground, but the hope of the Christian is that one day the blessing of Christ will flow over the whole earth **as far as the curse is found**. How far is the curse? The Bible tells us that it is everywhere. And what is the curse? It is the presence of sin inside us and around us, and what is embedded into the very fabric of the created world.

The Bible tells us that we have all fallen short of God's glory (Rom. 3:23), that there is no one righteous (Rom. 3:10), and that the whole creation groans under its bondage to decay (Rom. 8:22). The Bible interprets what is wrong with the world and helps us to understand the solution. The Bible tells us that sin, death, disease, broken relationships, and tears are not the final word. Jesus said it this way in the book of Revelation:

¹⁷ When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last,"¹⁸ and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. Revelation 1:17–18 (ESV)

Our world is filled with pain and tears, and that is why I've been saying "to cry is human." Crying is what all humans do, but Christian lament is different. Christian lament feels and expresses the sorrow of the brokenness of our humanity, but it does so *because* it understands what lies underneath our pain, and it knows what is the solution. Christian lament grieves the curse that causes pain, and it longs for the day when the blessings of Christ will flow as far as the curse is found.

Christian lament interprets pain by grieving for what lies underneath, and it longs for a better day under the rule and reign of Christ. And that is why to cry is human, but to lament is Christian.

Lament Tunes the Heart

Lament is not only useful as a means of expressing sorrow; it is a means by which God reminds us about the brokenness of the world. It would be a mistake to think of lament as a category that only expresses grief that we immediately feel. Lament can be our teacher.

Part of the reason why there are so many laments in the Psalms is to remind people that much of life is lived in a minor key, that there are many different kinds of suffering, and that God can still be trusted. Lament helps us to see life through a biblical and God-centered lens as we wrestle with pain or loss. It reminds us about the presence of suffering in the world, and it teaches us how to interpret it.

By praying or reading laments, our heart is tuned in to the pain of another. Lament awakens us to the meaning of pain, which we fail to understand, or it can serve to awaken us to pain that we tend to ignore. One of your takeaways from Lamentations will be the sober realization that there have been many times in biblical and human history where God said "Enough." The book of Lamentations and other Psalms reminds us that this does happen.

There is a human tendency to forget or ignore the embedded brokenness around us until it directly affects us. We will typically find it easier to lament when we are the ones who are suffering. Lament reminds us that brokenness is a much bigger issue than just its effect on us.

This Sunday is Sanctity of Life Sunday, and Monday is Martin Luther King Jr. day, and I'd like to spend some time thinking about how lament relates to these two dates on the calendar and a few other issues. I want our hearts to be tuned to hear the groan of a broken world and hurting people.

What it Means to be an “Image Bearer”

I want to see our hearts tuned to lament the brokenness connected to the devaluing of life in our culture. That is where this message will end, but in order for us to understand how to lament the loss of value, we have to first understand what is underneath and above life.

1. *Bearing God’s image is central and unique to humanity*

Genesis 1 is a helpful starting point because it records the creation of man and woman, and it identifies why that moment is so important. We see not only that Adam and Eve were created by God but that they were created in the image of God.

On the sixth day God created “living creatures according to their kinds – livestock, creeping thing and beasts of the earth” (1:24). God filled the earth with living creatures. But the crowning display of God’s creative power comes with the creation of man and woman. The language around their creation is unique because they are unique from the rest of the creation.

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.²⁸ And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” Genesis 1:26–28 (ESV)

Each of these verses is important:

- v. 26 – The Triune God (“us”) makes mankind in the image/likeness¹ of God and after God’s likeness, and humans are given a unique and exclusive authority over creation. Image and dominion are linked.
- v. 27 – The concept of image is repeated for emphasis in verse 27, and male and female are identified in order to emphasize that the image of God is embedded in both men and women. Please note that being an image bearer is linked to being created by God, whether male or female.
- v. 28 – Adam and Eve are blessed and commanded to be fruitful, to multiply, to fill the earth, and to have dominion. They are, in effect, to do in their world what God has done in His.

Genesis 1 establishes a very important foundation for our understanding about humanity and life. It identifies God as the creator and clarifies that mankind is unique from the rest of creation by virtue of what it means to be made in the image of God. Nothing else in all of creation reflects the image of God like men and women. There is something special about humanity, and it is connected to “image.”

¹ I’m linking these terms together as essentially the same reality. There is an extensive body of literature and discussion on if there is any material difference between image and likeness. I am not convinced that there is, and I take them as synonyms.

2. The image of God makes human life valuable, even after the Fall

Now if you know the rest of the story in Genesis, it is only two chapters later that Adam and Eve disobey God, sin enters the world, they are kicked out of the garden, and their son kills his own brother. Humanity is broken at its core because of the presence of sin. However, the image of God in mankind is not totally lost. The Fall may have marred the image of God, but it does not negate the reality of the image.

Genesis 9:6 is a command given to Noah after God's judgment through the flood. God was establishing some ethical perimeters related to life, and notice how image is connected to life:

⁵ And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. ⁶ "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image. Genesis 9:5-6 (ESV)

Notice that the ethical foundation for capital punishment is the fact that man is made in the image of God. In other words, murder is wrong because there is something intrinsically valuable about the life of a human, and that value is unique from the rest of the creation. That is why euthanizing a dog may be hard, but its fundamentally morally different than euthanizing a human being. The reason is because a dog is not made in the image of God.

3. The image of God provides the foundation for human relationships

In the New Testament we see a further extension and application of this concept of image. James 3 provides a strong warning against the misuse of the tongue, and in the context of that warning, we see that James uses the image of God as the reason for prohibiting cursing.

With it {the tongue} we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God . . . these things ought not to be so. James 3:9-10 (ESV)

Cursing people is wrong because doing so violates the sanctity of God's imprint on a particular human being. Whether its physical murder or verbal assault, human beings are not permitted to treat the image of God as if it's unimportant rather than sacred and honorable. Image is something beyond all of us.

4. The image of God is ultimately restored through Christ

What was lost in the Fall will one day be restored through the return and reign of Christ. Jesus came to redeem us from the effects of sin, and one of the tragic results is that while the image of God still exists in all human beings, it is obviously broken. That is what makes being a human so frustrating at times. One moment you could be basking in the beauty of human beings who are acting in a manner that is beautiful and glorious, and the next minute it is all ruined because of what the same human beings said or did. The purpose of the cross was to set in motion a redemptive process by which sinful human beings could be restored into the full image and likeness of God and His glory.

I say “set in motion” because there is a very clear sense in the Bible that when a person receives Christ, some aspect of this restoration begins. Now this restoration does make Christians more valuable, and it does mean that they are able to taste something beyond just broken humanity. They know that underneath humanity is the image of God, but above it is the restoration of the image of God. And they long for it.

Let me give you a few places where I see this:

² *Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears **we shall be like him**, because we shall see him as he is. 1 John 3:2 (ESV)*

⁹ *Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the **image of its creator**. Colossians 3:9–10 (ESV)*

²⁹ *For those whom he foreknew he also predestined **to be conformed to the image of his Son**, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. Romans 8:29 (ESV)*

²³ *and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created **after the likeness of God** in true righteousness and holiness. Ephesians 4:23–24 (ESV)*

These New Testament verses help us understand that the gospel seeks to solve the problem that we have with the image of God. Through Christ the trajectory of image-of-God-restoration is set. Christianity interprets humanity by giving all human life value, by identifying the God-ordained path toward restoration, and by experiencing little tastes of partial image restoration even now.

5. There is a God-given and inherent value in every person because of the image of God

To be made in the image of God means more than that human beings are creative, have a will, or are more intelligent than the rest of the created order. To be made in the image of God means more than that human beings are superior to anything else on earth and that we have simply been given dominion.

To be made in God’s image means that there is something uniquely special about the essence and the being of a human. Image-bearing certainly involves thinking, ruling, leading, creating, loving, etc., but those are merely the expressions of a metaphysical reality connected to our humanity. God made humans valuable. He made them His image-bearers. From a philosophical standpoint, image is an ontological issue. It is part of the essence of humanity.

Humans are valuable because the image of God is valuable. This belief is fundamental to a Christian understanding of life and ethics. In my ethics class I learned it this way: X is good because X is willed by God. Or you could think of this way: Lying is wrong because God has called lying sin. This formula applies to the issue of image in this way: Human life is valuable because God made us in His image. Therefore, a Christian worldview believes that every life has a fundamental value because value is tied to the imprint of God via what it means to be an image-bearer.

A contrasting and culturally dominant view is root value in function. The gravitational pull of our culture and our “works tendency” is toward viewing value through a value-add lens. Therefore, people who

don't add value or who don't seem to have much function are diminished, discounted, or destroyed because they are not perceived as functionally valuable.

It is no wonder that if a person does not believe in a Creator, doesn't understand the problem of sin in the world, doesn't understand the power of redemption, and has no appreciation for where history is headed, he or she will likely view life through a pragmatic, functional lens of humanity. The image of God has no significance for a person who doesn't believe in God. He will have a different view of life and its value because of his view of God.

6. Christians, of all people on earth, ought to value life in all its forms

My conclusion, therefore, is that those of us who believe that God is our creator, who understand the concept of image-bearing, who know about the ravages of sin, and who believe in Christ as our savior, redeemer and restorer ought to be passionate advocates for life. What's more, we ought to lament when that value is diminished or destroyed.

Those who understand what is underneath and what is beyond our humanity ought to celebrate the intrinsic God-ordained value of human life, and we ought to lament its loss. Being an image-bearer is far more foundational than we may even know or feel.

And lament can help us to wake up to the reality of what is wrong with the world. It can shake us out of our cultural slumber and remind us how important being an image-bearer really is. And it can send a strong message to the world that there is something more here than just an issue related to life. Lament tunes the heart to how God sees the world. Lament can serve as a great teacher or as a wake-up call.

Lamenting the Devaluing of Image

Let's now take what we've learned about the concept of the image of God and apply it to a number of areas related both to lament and humanity. How should we think and how should we pray as we interpret our culture through the lens of lament?

1. Abortion

It is estimated that there are 4,400 babies aborted every day in the United States.² Just try to get your head around that number! Since *Roe v Wade* in 1973, it is believed that over 56 million babies have been killed, and while it is encouraging to know that abortion rates have been declining since 2010 (about 12 percent)³ the fact that so much innocent blood has been shed in our land is tragic and devastating.

But the problem is not only abortion but its effects as well. For every baby that is aborted, there is a woman and perhaps a man who even today deal with the regrets of that decision. In preparing for this message, I came to understand that the number of people within the church who could be described as "post-abortive" is much higher than what I realized. Since 70 percent of those who have abortions profess some kind of religious background, there is a very good chance that there are a number of you hearing this message. And I want you to know that Jesus died for every sin that separates us from God,

² <https://juicyecumenism.com/2016/01/13/35331/>

³ <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/06/american-abortion-rate-decline/395960/>

including abortion. I want to assure you that “where sin abounded, grace abounds all the more!” (Rom. 5:20) I want to assure you of God’s love, compassion and forgiveness.

The image of God means that not just that life begins at conception, but that every two-celled zygote bears the image of God. Even if it could not survive outside the womb on its own, even if he or she has no body parts, and even if it has no functionality in the world, it is still image. Why? Because image is connected to being, to divine imprint, and to something beyond us.

So let us lament the millions of children who were never born. Let us lament the shedding of innocent blood in our land. Let us lament the moment when a mother decides that her body is more valuable than a baby’s body. Let us lament the trafficking of convenience, expediency, and even the body parts of aborted children. Let us lament the “spin” language that makes abortion pro-choice. Let us lament the pain and regret that some have to battle every day. Let us lament a culture for which this issue has become far too common and much too tolerable.

2. Racism

The devaluing of image happens not only in the womb but also in culture when one person thinks, feels, or acts as if another person is less valuable. When it comes to racism, that happens because a person comes to believe overtly or subtly that there is something superior about one race over another. What happens in racism is that some value other than the image of God becomes the foundational value. Pride, fear, control, ignorance, greed or any number of other issues eclipse the value of the image of God.

In 1965 Martin Luther King, Jr. talked about the image of God like this:

"The image of God is the idea that all men have something within them that God injected. Not that they have substantial unity with God, but that every man has a capacity to have fellowship with God. And this gives him a uniqueness, it gives him worth, it gives him dignity. And we must never forget this as a nation: There are no gradations in the image of God. Every man from a treble white to a bass black is significant on God's keyboard, precisely because every man is made in the image of God. One day we will learn that. We will know one day that God made us to live together as brothers and to respect the dignity and worth of every man. This is why we must fight segregation with all of our nonviolent might."⁴

Now if the church of Jesus understands the theological reality of bearing the image of God, if we understand that our common problem in the world is sin, and if we know that the gospel can unite us then the church (of all places!) – THIS church! - should be a place with beautiful Jesus-magnifying oneness. Those who have tasted the beauty of the gospel should be more compassionate, more forgiving, more intentional in diversity and more passionate for racial reconciliation than anyone else.

So let us lament the scourge of racism that has been a part of our nation’s history. Let us lament that it wasn’t that long ago that buses and schools and restaurants and bathrooms were segregated. Let us lament hurtful words, oppressive behavior, and community rejection. Let us lament the distorted view of who is really valuable. Let us lament the pain that still lies beneath the surface. Let us lament the walls of separation, the misunderstandings, and the guardedness that we still feel. And let us lament cultural

⁴ Preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia, July 4, 1965. http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/ehttp://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_the_american_dream/ncyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_the_american_dream/

forces, economic realities, and institutionalized bias that exists in reality and in perception. Let us long for day when with one voice we will glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

3. Disabilities

This is different from abortion and racism in many ways, and yet I want to include it because it is very relevant to this topic of bearing God's image. It is different, of course, in that abortion and racism are wrong and having a disability is not. But I want to tune your heart to this issue as well.

Remember, image is about divinely given value, not function. By definition, a person with a disability, and a family affected by a disability, have a function that is less than ideal. That is what the word disability means. Whether it is a child or an adult, to have a disability means that you are functionally different. But while that may be true, a disabled person is no less valuable. Why? Because their value does not exist in function. Their ultimate value rests on the imprint of God upon them.

Once again, who should understand this better than a Christian? I would say: no one! We should see something different when we see a disabled person. We should see past the disability and past the differences between us and them. We should see them as a person made in the image of God, and we should celebrate the imprint of God in them that surpasses any functional gap. And if they are a follower of Jesus, we should long for the day when disabilities will be no more.

So let us lament the brokenness in the created order that causes disabilities. Let us lament the frustrating limitations and the daily challenges that are a part of a disabled person's life. Let us lament the rejection that they've felt. Let us lament the distance that a disability needlessly creates just because people are different. Let us lament the lack of concern and sensitivity that our brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers often feel.

To bear the image of God means that there is something about the very being of God in a human being. Now we don't have time to press this subject further into orphans, immigrants, the elderly, the incarcerated, and the poor. But I could, and you should.

Christian lament interprets the world. It sees a "thing," but it sees "the thing" underneath and "the thing" above. When it comes to humanity, Christians see something (at least we should) different when we see a human. And if we know we should see something different and we don't, or if we don't feel something that we should, we need to use the grace of lament to tune our hearts to long for the blessings of Christ to flow as far as the curse is found.

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